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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**FIRST SPEECH**  
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BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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<b>Speaker</b> Gallagher, Sen Katy	<b>Question No.</b>

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**Senator GALLAGHER** (Australian Capital Territory) (17:00): I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners, the Ngunawal people, upon whose ancestral lands this chamber is built. I pay my respects to elders both past and present and acknowledge their enduring connection to these ancient lands.

I thank the people of the ACT for the support they have shown me and to the membership of ACT Labor for giving me the honour of becoming the eighth senator for the ACT. I take over from a long-serving senator, the Hon. Kate Lundy. Kate served her community and her party with distinction during her 19 years of service. She was a senator who broke down barriers and set an exemplary standard that others wanted to follow. I am lucky to be able to call Kate a friend and follow in her footsteps. Thank you, Kate, for the support you have shown me and the gentle persuasion used to encourage me to come into this place.

One hundred and four years ago, on 1 January 1911, 910 square miles of land was excised from New South Wales to become the Federal Capital Territory and the site of the national capital. It was, according to media reports at the time, an occasion when a young Australian nation and the community of the limestone plains crossed paths. The Bush Capital, with more than half of our jurisdiction dedicated to national park and nature reserves, delivered on the desire to have a modern city that coexisted with the natural beauty of the area that had originally drawn the Federation fathers to this place.

This is my place; it is my home. It is a city of four seasons, where the dry, intense heat of summer drives you indoors until the sun goes down; where the glorious colours of autumn create picture-scapes that seem too pretty to be true; to the sub-zero temperatures of winter, when the air feels almost too cold to breathe; until the blooms and early warmth of spring signal the welcome end to the winter hibernation. It is a place where you can explore the stories that created our nation and its identity, through our wars, our art, our laws, our democracy, our history. We are the custodians of our nation's story—our national spirit—and we are proud of this role.

From its earliest days, Canberra has been seen as a government town, a place where politics happens, and at times we wear this reputation like heavy saddlebags—but we are so much more than that. In just over 102 years, Canberra has grown into a mature city, forging its own identity, separate but complementary to the role of the nation's capital. It is not just the locals who think Canberra is pretty great. In 2014, the OECD recognised Canberra as the world's most liveable city. It is hard to get better than that. We are Australia's largest inland city, a diverse community nearing 400,000 people living within a region of close to 600,000. One-fifth of our community was born overseas and our people have been drawn here from nearly 200 different countries. We are big enough to enjoy the benefits that city living brings but small enough to maintain a strong sense of community—never clearer than when, in 2003, bushfires ripped through our urban fringe, killing four, seriously injuring many more, destroying more than 500 homes and damaging almost 70 per cent of ACT pasture, forest and nature parks.

As the seat of government, it is no surprise that Canberra's economy has been dependent on government and government services, but Canberra has a private sector that punches above its weight, with a flourishing small-business community, a growing export industry and an innovation and entrepreneurial sector that is developing quickly and is globally reaching. Canberra has developed a reputation as a world-class knowledge centre, with institutions like the ANU and the University of Canberra, which, along with UNSW, the Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt University and CIT, educate 44,000 tertiary students each year. Collectively, these institutions contribute \$2.7 billion to our economy and create 16,000 full-time equivalent jobs. CSIRO and NICTA contribute to the knowledge economy and, despite the funding cuts they have suffered, remain renowned internationally for their research and their commercialisation outcomes. Our tourism industry contributes \$1.6 billion to the ACT economy and is one of the territory's largest private sector employers, supporting over 14,700 jobs. There is huge opportunity for growth in this sector, particularly with the newly completed Canberra International Airport—and I look forward to the day when international flights come to this city.

With the exception of Robert Menzies, conservative administrations have not been great friends of Canberra. In 1996, when John Howard took the razor to Canberra, our community hurt and the economy went into recession. In 2013, Joe Hockey, in perhaps his first housing affordability gaffe, sent a warning of what was to come when he joked about the impact a Liberal government would have on our local housing market, saying, 'There is a golden rule for real estate in Canberra—you buy Liberal and you sell Labor.' In 2014, the Liberal cuts came back, with approximately 6,000 jobs lost here in one year alone, but, unlike in 1996, our economy has proven its resilience and, while we feel bruised, the ACT economy has continued to grow throughout.

It has often struck me as odd that, for a city that was hand-picked as the home of Australian democracy, Canberra's own citizens have had to fight, over many years, to gain democratic rights equal to other Australians. It was not until 1949 that the people of the ACT were given a limited voice in the Australian parliament, and it was not until 1966 that full voting rights were granted. Under Gough Whitlam, territory representation took a giant step forward with the creation of the electorates of Canberra and Fraser, with the Senate following in 1975—but only after both the Western Australian and Queensland governments failed in their respective High Court challenges to oppose it. It is not widely known that ACT residents were not allowed to vote in constitutional referenda or plebiscites until 1977, when it was put to the states in a referendum and got up—it is amazing that I am here, really, considering how hard it is to win a 'yes' vote this way. Looking at the results, Queenslanders remained unconvinced at the time, with 40 per cent voting 'no'. It did not take ACT residents long to show their independence and exercise their new rights when they became the only jurisdiction to buck the national trend and vote for *Waltzing Matilda* over *Advance Australia Fair* as the preferred national song in a plebiscite held later that year.

The march to full democracy continues at a slow pace. The 26-year-old territory legislature remains constrained by provisions of the self-government act, whereby the ACT parliament can still have its laws overturned and is prevented entirely from passing certain laws that are available to the states. There should be a review of these constraints conducted cooperatively between the Commonwealth and ACT governments, with a view to removing these constraints and allowing the assembly to govern without interference.

My parents arrived in Canberra in 1969 from the United Kingdom via New Zealand following my father's recruitment to the Australian Public Service. The Canberra of that time had a population of just 70,000 people, although it was growing rapidly. For a young couple from the UK with no family or friends, I can only imagine the culture shock of arriving and settling with young children in one of the new suburbs on the urban fringe of our city. Betsy and Charles Gallagher took very seriously their responsibility to rear their children as independent, educated and community-minded citizens. My brothers and sister have joined me here this evening. We were taught that we had to contribute to our community if we were to be full participants in it. My parents were open-minded to the world around them and they encouraged the same for their children. They understood that every family was different and that lived experience for some was hard. We were taught from our earliest days never to judge anyone; never to think we were better or worse than anyone else. In our non-religious home the values of love, kindness, care, compassion, understanding and forgiveness were fundamental parts of our upbringing. Living without my parents in my life is a source of great sadness, but the values they instilled in me continue to influence and shape my perspective on life and the decisions I take. I remain eternally grateful for the guidance and love they gave me.

I graduated from ANU 1991 and spent the next decade working in the community sector, primarily with people with a disability, arguing for improved rights and voices for vulnerable people. This was the time when a great Labor reform, the Disability Discrimination Act, had come into operation, and I saw firsthand how good laws change lives for the better. I helped to close down sheltered workshops and large residential institutions, and I learnt to be a fierce advocate for those who could not speak for themselves. I saw up close how important an adequately resourced disability sector is to ensure human dignity. That is why, when I was Chief Minister of the ACT, we were one of the first governments to sign onto the NDIS vision under Julia Gillard's government. I later put the advocacy skills I had learnt to good use when I joined the trade union movement as an industrial organiser for the CPSU. Organising under a Howard government seemed hard enough, but I suspect, in hindsight, it was a relative workers' paradise compared to the anti-union attitude of the current government. To all of those working people who are fighting just to maintain conditions and get a fair pay outcome—all strength to you.

I cannot really pinpoint the exact reason why I chose politics, in 2000, although the lack of women members in the assembly ranked highly. It is disappointing to me that in 2015 women remain so under-represented across Australian parliaments. Women constitute just under 30 per cent of all elected representatives across Australia

and hold just 25 per cent of all ministries across all parliaments. We must re-commit across party lines to encourage more women into political organisations, to support them when they are there and mentor them into roles and positions within parties and across parliaments.

If increasing the number of women in politics was one motivator for me to give politics a shot so was motherhood. In 2000, I was a single mum with a young child, and I was struggling to find my place in the world following the death of my daughter's father just three years before. Issues like paid parental leave, equal pay, sole parent pensions, childcare and family payments, flexible work arrangements and affordable health care all took on a new relevance in my life. Motherhood and political campaigning drew me back in from a self-imposed wilderness and helped me to find my voice again. In the 2001 territory elections, I became the candidate who was not expected to win, who did.

I spent the next thirteen years as a member of the ACT Legislative Assembly, contesting four elections successfully. Twelve of those years I spent as a minister across various portfolios, including three as Treasurer, eight as health minister and three and a half as Chief Minister. It was an incredible privilege to serve in these roles. I am proud of the work we achieved as a Labor government that was prepared to invest in and build our city—not only in terms of infrastructure but also with services and by way of promoting social inclusion.

In what turned out to be my last months as Chief Minister, I committed myself to providing a lasting solution to the Mr Fluffy asbestos tragedy that has plagued our city for the past 50 years. Whilst it is early days in this program, I have no doubt that the decision to buy back affected homes and provide owners with a financial solution and finally remove the asbestos threat was the right one—both for affected owners and for the city. It remains a blight on this federal government's record that they refused to step up and take any responsibility—financially or morally—for something that happened on the Commonwealth's watch prior to self-government.

As a member of executive government for more than a decade, I gained invaluable insight into the important role that governments play in building and creating resilient communities. In that time I always tried to do the right thing for my community—as opposed to the easiest or the most popular. I learnt the importance of showing leadership when it is needed, in displaying judgement, having the ability to listen, to learn from others, and to accept that government is not always right, and that acknowledging mistakes is often as important as celebrating victories.

I learnt the importance of a fearless and non-partisan public service and the need for strong accountability mechanisms, including complaint, dispute and audit bodies that provide independent oversight and act as a check and balance on executive authority. Laws and policies to provide access to government information and to provide avenues to pursue public interest disclosures are equally important. I learnt that good governments can accept criticism, disagree with it but never feel the need to silence it. I learnt the importance of using evidence to underpin decisions, of involving experts and stakeholders in policy development and of ensuring that different opinions are heard and valued—even if they are ultimately disagreed with. I learnt that when speaking with my community, honesty was definitely the best policy and that not having the answer and saying so was better than trying to fudge it.

I am a supporter of an Australian republic and for reaching agreement on the best way to formally recognize the first peoples of this land. I am a supporter of equality across the board—no ifs no buts, no caveats. I support a fair Australia, a diverse Australia and an Australia that looks to the future openly and optimistically. I support a country that provides for all its citizens and ensures that any economic agenda includes, at the centre, the capacity to create jobs, and provide essential services which support each one of us live a dignified and meaningful life.

I believe that governments should manage their budget in an economically responsible manner and at the same time invest in and provide for their citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. I believe that universal access to health and education, affordable housing, fair wages and conditions and pensions are fundamental components of any social contract in a fair minded and prosperous country.

I believe that we can have debates on national security to keep our community safe and still show compassion and care for people fleeing persecution and seeking refuge in foreign countries. I believe that politicians should not shy away from the harder, more complex and more divided debates. It is exactly these types of debates—on issues like climate change, housing affordability, domestic violence and the rising burden of chronic disease—that need strong leadership, and advocates who champion solutions for them. I believe in the unions and the

role they play in ensuring that workers, particularly those on low incomes, are able to bargain for reasonable pay and safe workplaces.

Because of all of this, I have been a proud member of the Australian Labor Party for the last 20 years. As the enduring party of progressive politics, and the party of reform, the Australian Labor Party has led the national debates which have helped to shape modern Australia. This is a record of achievement for which we are rightly proud. Whether it be in Indigenous rights and recognition, health care, superannuation, pensions, the economy, education and skills, equality, multiculturalism, infrastructure, industrial relations or the environment, it has been the Australian Labor that has fought for the changes that have come and for the rights that we all enjoy today. And this work never ends. For Labor senators and MPs, this record, and building upon it, is what motivates us in our work every day.

And as the party of reform we cannot exempt ourselves from reform. We must get serious about adopting reforms that give party members a greater say. All Labor pre-selections should be open to a full membership ballot—one vote, one value. This requires candidates to earn the votes they get. It promotes transparency and accountability and will deliver a better outcome for the party. The labour movement should have influence in the Labor Party, but that influence can be used without seeking dominance. A respectful and close relationship can be maintained whilst at the same time allowing party members a greater say. This is the way it has operated in the ACT for more than a decade, and we are without doubt the most successful ALP branch in the country.

We live in arguably one of the world's most successful federated systems. Over the past 114 years, the Federation has endured as a strong partnership between all governments in Australia. This partnership has been critical to our success as a nation. But the system is not perfect. There are areas of duplication and areas where improvements could be made. But any reform agenda must not simply be an exercise in pursuing one government's political agenda over another, or an exercise in blame-shifting, cost-shifting or placing unreasonable expectations on smaller governments.

The \$80 billion cuts to health and education funding should remain the No. 1 item on the agenda because, whilst the colour of the various governments might change over time, there are some things we know for sure—on the streets and suburbs of Australia, where it actually matters, there are not going to be any fewer patients needing care in hospital and there are not going to be any fewer children in need of an education. I was lucky to be the ACT health minister for more than eight years. The creativity, passion and dedication that I witnessed every day in that role has left me with a lifelong interest in this area. The Australian healthcare system delivers high quality outcomes but it is under enormous pressure; and, under the policies of the current government, this is only going to get worse. I am not a mathematician but if the cost of providing hospital services is growing at 5.5 per cent per annum, yet a major funding partner, the Commonwealth, is only prepared to provide increases of 1.7 per cent, at some stage this is going to create a major problem for healthcare systems and patients which will take years to undo.

The state of preventive health care planning at the national level is a disgrace. The unprecedented efforts of the previous government have been disbanded or defunded. Resources are needed to plan for, prevent and stop the rapid growth in chronic disease across the community, particularly amongst vulnerable populations. Never has this work been more important than it is today. Failing to address this now will create demand down the track which will be impossible to meet and unaffordable to provide.

And, finally, to this great chamber I speak from tonight: the architects of our constitution were a clever group. They created this chamber to embed within the heart of our most important democratic institution a measure of protection for the states and a check on hubris, which, history shows us, is sometimes the unwelcome baggage that travels with executive power. As I have watched the national political scene since the last election, it has been clear to me that it has been this place, the Australian Senate, that has stepped up to perform its constitutional role and push back against the overreach of executive government.

It is a chamber well accustomed to knocking the barnacles off the ship of state by amending, and even refusing, legislation that is not in the national interest. In this respect it is a kind of 'dry dock' for legislation. Anyone who complains that the Senate should simply wave through the policy and legislative excess of the current government either does not understand or does not like the checks and balances of our democratic system. It has not been a 'feral' Senate, as Tony Abbott has suggested, but, rather, a fearless Senate, a fair Senate, a Senate that has listened to the Australian people when the current government has not.

I have been very fortunate in my life to have wonderful friends, many of whom have come to share this moment with me today. I thank them for the friendship and laughter we have shared and for always being there for me when I needed them.

Tonight I would also like to specifically acknowledge those who have played a significant role in my career in politics. Firstly, to Wendy Caird and Margaret Gillespie: these women met me when I was at my lowest point in life. I was unemployable and they gave me the dignity of a job. I am forever thankful for the potential they saw in me and for the time they invested to get me back on track. To Jon Stanhope, my mentor and friend: we forged a great partnership and I am incredible lucky to have had Jon's support throughout my political career. To John Watkins: I met the Hon. John Watkins, AM, six years ago. We got off to a bumpy start but, over time, we grew to greatly respect each other. He has been incredibly generous to me with his time, advice and guidance. To Mike Samaras and Stephen Jones, the member for Throsby, who joins me here tonight: we met more than 20 years ago, through a shared friend; even though he is no longer with us, you have honoured his memory and become wonderful friends of mine in the process.

To my sister, Clare, and my brothers, Richard and Matthew, who join me here today: whilst I am the one on my feet tonight, I know how proud our parents would be of all of us and the adults we have become. To David, who taught me to love again—it all began with our shared love of beagles. Thank you for walking alongside me this past 10 years and for always being there. To Abby, Charlie and Evie: thank you for keeping it real. There is nothing more important to me than you three. You are my greatest love and it is an absolute honour to be your mum.

Finally, can I thank all the people who have helped me to settle in to my new role over the past three months. In particular, to Penny Wong: thank you. You and your office have been incredible. Anne McEwen and Joseph Ludwig, I appreciate the time and the guidance you have provided to me. To my new colleagues, both here and in the House: thank you for your warm welcome. I look forward to working with you and contributing to the federal Labor team. I know that I come to this place with a lot to learn, and I will listen, learn, take advice and work hard to be an effective senator for the people of the ACT and the Australian Labor Party. Thank you